

What are the top 10 big philosophical questions most people wonder about?

Questions like "What am I?", "Is there any purpose in life?" etc. What are the top 10 big philosophical questions most people wonder about at different stages of their lives?

by Nikhil Mahant

*Below is my list of philosophical issues that I think concern people the most. I state my own beliefs at times, and this piece is in no way neutral, so please take it with a pinch of salt :)

1. What is the Meaning of Life?

This is probably the question most often hurled at philosophy teachers, students, and street philosophers at evening parties. The question has probably been harrowing humanity ever since human beings became capable of thought & reason and began to seriously reflect upon their condition. And century after century, wise men and religious personalities have addressed and tried to answer this concern in their own ways.

And now, with the dogma of religion melting away, and the origin & validity of existing knowledge coming under fresh attack, the question assumes all the more significance.

The question is notoriously complex to approach. It seems that with every attempt, one is only left with a different understanding of the question.

What does it mean to ask the 'meaning' of life? Does one intend to ask what one 'ought to do' in life or does one intend to ask if there is any meaning to life, like words have meaning. What is the logical structure of the question "What is the meaning of life", does this question make any sense? How do we know it not a sort of question like "Does aspirin cure steel?"

Or does it ask whether there is anything of significance or value to our individual lives?



And when one makes a jump from investigating the meaning of the question itself to proposing an answer, one encounters skepticism as to why a particular answer should be correct?

Yet others, notably the famous existentialists, propose that asking for meaning of life is like putting the cart before the horse. That first and foremost we are

ontological beings, we exist, and it's only afterwards that we choose an essence or meaning. Thus, life itself is meaningless, albeit the meaning of life is just one that the 'being in existence' chooses to give it. And again, one is compelled to return back to the question, and examine if the existentialist's answer compels withdrawal of the original question, or is just a cheat follow up.

2. Who am I?

This question, like the previous one, leads to many questions at once. Is the intention to intended to investigate what is at the centre of all sensory experiences, beliefs, motivations, emotions etc.? Is there any such thing as an "I"? How do I know that my notion of "I" is not just an illusion, mistaken belief? If it's not an illusion, then what exactly is the nature of this "I"?

One of the most well known views on this question came from Rene Descartes, the founder of the Cartesian Coordinate system, who contended that he, above everything else, was a thinking thing. It's through thinking that Identity emerges. Cogito Ergo Sum. I think, therefore I Exist. Thus began the belief in the western world of the special status of human beings as thinking things, unlike animals which were now seen more like stimulus response machines, and not thinking things.



But Descartes' ultra-rationalist approach came under serious reconsideration with rise of the opinion that there could be something else much more primitive to thinking. It was realized that not only it's through thinking but also only within thinking that identity emerges. For example, in situations of 'Flow', Identity, if not completely suspended, just does not matter.

As Martin Heidegger put it, my most primitive experience of world is not of my thinking about something, but rather, my first experience of the world is about first 'being there'. Heidegger asserted that it was fallacious to conceive being there as something detached from the world, but rather, being there is the world. In states such as playing a rather involved football match or applying oneself in a rather intricate puzzle, one is at home with the world, and identity does not interfere, in fact identity is suspended in moments of such close one-ness with the world. Contemporary and later philosophers relegated thinking to the level of being a disease, something that segregates "I" from the the world.

Contemporary philosophers, including the famous Dan Dennett regard that consciousness, within which Identity is placed, could very well be an illusion that our

brain plays. It's the brain's way of projecting the world, which breaks down in many neural disorders and neuroscience experiments.

It remains only an irony that we yet know so little about something that we think we are closest to, our own identities!

3. Could I be living in a Matrix?

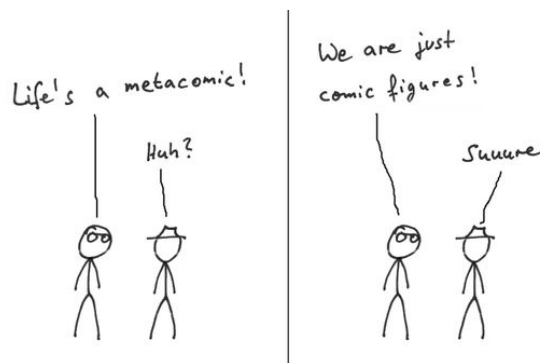
This is the classic "Brain in a Vat" (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bra...>) position, that resonates itself through history in different cultures (The argument is behind the biggest debates in philosophy, here is only my brief take on it.)

Our version of the 'outer world' is entirely based on the data our brains receive from our five senses (in form of neuro-electrical signals). Brain in a Vat talks of the possibility that our brains could actually have been kept in a petri-dish, being fed sense data in form of neuro - electrical signals engineered so as to project a consistent, though unreal world to us. The real world would be a world full of brains in petri-dishes all being fed electrical signals by, let's say, some sinister agents.

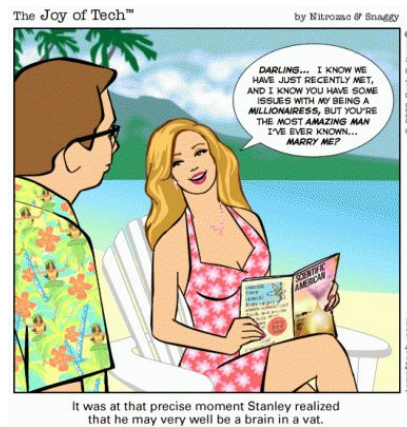
(The idea gave me goosebumps when I first came across it.)

But then, one slowly realizes that Brain in a Vat is actually just a skeptical possibility. While there is no reason to believe that our brains are not kept in a Vat in some real world out there, neither is there a reason to believe that our brains are kept in one. The burden of proof lies on both the possibilities.

Also, for once, if we assume that our brains are actually lying in a vat in some other metaworld, it gives rise to the possibility, that brains of the 'sinister agents' of that meta world, are themselves lying in petri-dishes of some meta meta world. This can be extended infinitely to create an infinite chain of meta worlds, which, on the face of it, seems like a fallacy.



Further, the machines from the movie actually left glitches in The Matrix allowing a possibility for 'trapped brains' to become 'aware' of the matrix. Imagine a brain trapped in a Vat whose programming is just perfect, leaving no possibility for the trapped brain to become aware of its condition. In such a sordid scenario, where it is not possible to know for a brain that it is actually a brain in a vat; does it even matter for the brain to be in a vat? The idea is that the concept of 'brain in a vat' defies truth, falsity or even the concern for truth or falsity, for it is, by definition, beyond the possibility of knowledge.



As a possibility, Brain in a Vat remains one of the most discussed topics.

4. What is Right / Wrong?

One of the most important concerns in everyday life is the distinction between right and wrong. While most of us seem to agree about particular actions being right and others being wrong, there seems to be a lot of confusion on the basis of such a distinction.

A simple point of beginning could be the assertion that universal values of (right & wrong) do exist – in which case, the task is just to find out which values are right and which are wrong. However what could be the basis of finding out of such universal ethical values?

One could be the way of religious dogma, wherein one passionately believes in the values entrenched in one's particular religion, or the values prescribed by religious authorities and texts.

However, with the decline of dogma, the question again acquires the centre stage in human affairs. Attempts have been made to establish rational principles that guide the process of finding out the Universal values, such as those by Immanuel Kant (See: The Categorical imperative) and Utilitarianism. However any rational principle is itself subject to the skeptical question: What makes it right to accept a particular rational principle (for defining right/wrong) over another rational principle?

The presence of more than one rational principle of judging right from wrong puts the very idea of Existence of Universal Values under question.



There is no such thing as a perfect ethical law.

Another way could be to treat right / wrong values as entirely subjective concerns, wherein there exists no universal objective principals to inform individual decision. With this, we are again brought back to the question - if there is no objective right and no objective wrong, why are laws there? (most cultures, societies and countries do assume existence of universal values in formulation of their laws, customs, which are then applicable equally on everyone.)

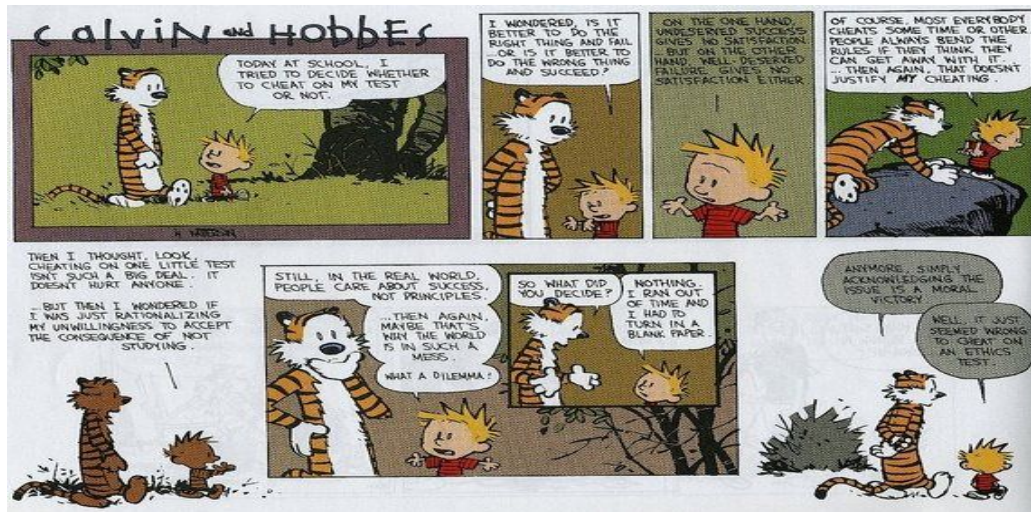
More importantly, what makes us feel so strongly, at the individual's level, that, something, let's say, murder and rape is wrong? The idea of something being right and other things being wrong seem hard wired in a human, though the criteria of how to know what is right and what is wrong is not.

A very different approach to this question was advocated by the German Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who held that the dichotomy between right & wrong is indeed false. Nietzsche, in his 'Genealogy of Morals' states that the powerful men of the ancient times (masters) were only concerned with the idea of excelling at something, rather than finding the right thing to do. Value was placed in excellence, i.e. how well they did that something, rather than what exactly was the thing that they did.

The huge population of slaves in those times, who did not have the kind of choices that the masters enjoyed, created another set of reactionary values, out of jealousy. Thus the slaves would label the kind of things that the masters enrolled in as wrong actions, and the opposite action would be considered right. Thus the notions of accumulating wealth, having pride etc. were considered as wrong by the slaves. And the emphasis of the large population of the slaves on assigning values to particular actions (as opposed to assigning value to excellence in that action) got reflected in religious (moral) thought and thus the wrong actions began to be called evil actions.

This is how, Nietzsche says, the emphasis of human action shifted from the idea of excellence (in whatever one chooses to do), to what kind of actions are the right actions.

I'd end this with Calvin's dilemma.



5. What is Time?

We are all caught in the unflinching grip of time. It's everywhere, associated with us, our lives, moment by moment, every moment. Some people define it as something that distinguishes beginning from end. Others call it the direction of increase in entropy of the Universe. Yet others define it as just what the clock shows us.

Time eludes explanation and understanding, ever since one gets aware of it. It is like someone coming in one day to live with you permanently, someone who stays with you, follows you where you go, accompanies you in whatever you do. Even when you don't notice him, he's there standing by you, like a ghost. Yet you have no clue as to who he is, what he does and where he came from.

A common view of time in science is of it's being a dimension of the Universe, something that is an essential part of the Universe, like space. Scientists tell us that the Big Bang was the beginning of time. It is senseless to ask what happened before the Big Bang because there was no time before Big Bang, thus there was no before and there was no after. They say that space and time are the essential attributes of the Universe. Others disagree.

Another view is that time and space are of our making, not part of the Universe. There is no time in itself. They are merely our impositions on the Universe to make sense of it. They are the necessary glasses through which we view the Universe.

Yet others believe that it is possible to take off these glasses. Stories are told about the Mystics' escape of time and space.

I wonder how would the mystic respond to a timestamped recording of his meditation in a tamper resistant camera.

Time continues to baffle imagination and reason.

6. What happens after death?

In a sense, it is a wrong question to ask. Death, by definition, stands for cessation of being. Thus after death, life stops, and you no longer exist.

However, this is not how this question is put to most of us, for a general person on the street is a Cartesian Dualist, which is to say most of us believe that there is more to

our material bodies. That there is a mind, apart from our bodies. And the mind (or as some would call it, soul) is not governed by the rules and laws that govern physical material. So, when a person dies, his heartbeat stops, and organs stop functioning, there is still a reason to believe that the mind persists, because it is beyond the purview of the rules that material objects must follow, hence the mind doesn't need nutrition from the blood, it doesn't need to be maintained in the homeostasis of the body.

The question then is, what happens to our minds when the body stops functioning? Here again, much explanation is provided by religious dogma. The entire concept of an afterlife, heaven and hell, and how one's deeds in this world would help in another.

There are many problems with such thinking. The concept of a 'mind' plays a big role in philosophy, especially in characterization of subjective phenomena, consciousness & distinguishing humans from machines. But the very proposal that minds could persist the death of body seems more a result of the psychological fear of death, an escape mechanism humans adopt to handle the dark truth of the ultimate destruction of their selves, in the face of an innate desire to live. Secondly, the ways to know about the mind are debilitatingly limited. Minds, by definition are not subject to material laws, and hence escape any examination under the scientific method (which restricts itself to observable, experimentally demonstrable & repeatable phenomena), leaving reasoning and introspection as the only means to know anything about the mind. While existence & persistence of soul is acceptable as a philosophical possibility, the utter uselessness of construing a mind which continues an afterlife seems a fantastic construction of thought rooted more in psychological fear than in a need to solve a philosophical problem.

It's not an uncontested thesis, but probably, we are nothing more than our bodies, may be our minds are just a result of our enormously complex brains. And may be upon our death, we just cease to exist.

An study of what death is, and what happens after death requires an understanding of what it means to have a self, and it requires the investigator to possess some clear means to know about issues concerning death. In the absence of such clarity, the issue of death (if it's an issue at all) remains shrouded in smog.

7. Are human beings just machines?

The question whether humans are just advanced machines has been around since long, and whether human being is just a computer is a topic of intense research in contemporary philosophy.

Perhaps to the primitive man, anything that moved was alive. The image of the first machines with moving parts must have given rise to the speculation if human body was just another machine.

Today, with increased scientific understanding, few would question that much of the body the movements and mechanistic in nature, following and exploiting some basic physical laws.

But when it comes to the special ability of human beings, the ability to think, that the debate begins. There are at least two very clear positions. One position states that human brains are just sufficiently complex computing machines. The other position shrugs in disagreement, maintaining that there's more to the thinking phenomenon

of humans, the mind, which is definitely more than just a computer (or any other machine that we know of).

One side contends that 'mind' is just a result of a sufficiently complex brain (or another view that 'mind' is just an illusion played by our biology) and the other school maintains that a computing machine, however complex it may be, would forever subjective phenomena like our perception of colours, feelings, emotions, our understanding of semantics (the meaning we attach to our experiences), our ability to direct our attention to anything that we want to direct it to (intentionality) etc. (see: Hard problem of consciousness).

The question is central to Artificial Intelligence, and among the most discussed topics in Philosophy of Mind today.

8. Does God Exist?

Your thoughts on this are your thoughts. No need to comment it on this one.

9. Destiny? Free Will?

It's a concept familiar to all.

Is whatever we do, did or will do in future pre-decided pre-figured?

Or do we have complete control of our actions, and ability to shape our future?

It's not very comfortable to think of ourselves as being trapped in a definite, predetermined fate. Nothing we could do can have any effect, because what'll happen has already been written. Unfortunately, bodies of knowledge around us seem to give us this model of the Universe.

Traditionally, religions have postulated a view of an omniscient God. A Being which knows the past, the present and the future of the Universe. A knowledge of a future Universe (assuming that it is definite & true knowledge) implies that Universe would have a definite and assured state of existence in future. Hence determinism. If God is omniscient in this very sense, then we are trapped in a pre-conceived life. All our passions are useless, actions are of no avail. What's to happen, will happen.

And so follow the other paradoxes of religion, Why should one be held responsible for an action which is meant to happen no matter what? If there is a definite determined future, isn't God just a character in this big Cosmic play just that he is sitting on the stands?

The rabbit hole goes deeper. Science gives us another version of determinism. The very conception of Universal physical laws suggest determinism.

Let's say, there do exist true physical laws that govern all entities in the Universe, then:

If the physical characteristics (position, velocity, energy, mass etc.) of all particle at time 't' is known

then

The physical characteristics (position, velocity, energy, mass etc.) of all particle at the next instant of time, $t + \Delta t$ ($= t_1$) can be found out by application of the physical laws.

and

The physical characteristics (position, velocity, energy, mass etc.) of all particle at the next instant, i.e. time $t_1 + \Delta t = t_2$ can be found out by applying the physical laws.

And so on.

Thus,

If there do exist true & definite physical laws, the physical characteristics (position, velocity, energy, mass etc.) of all particle at all times is pre-determined.

Nevertheless, despite these theoretical models, it feels quite counter intuitive to believe that there is no free will. Afterall, day in and day out we take decisions, take actions and execute our will.

Another way to look at free will is by way of looking at 'free will' as our freedom to make choices. Whatever be the situation, whatever Universe or time we be thrown into, choices are always available to us. And because we have those choices, we are free. This way of looking at freedom de-links free will from the state of Universe, but rather defines free-will in terms of the individual's relationship with the Universe. There can be infinite ways an individual may choose to relate with the Universe, and hence is essentially free. And because an individual is free to get into any relationship with the Universe around him, he must assume full responsibility of his choices.

Below is a funny SMBC illustration of the debate :D

10. What is Philosophy?

We wonder about or at least have conceptions about is the nature of philosophy itself.

While the sciences are defined and disciplined in terms of what they enquire and how they enquire it, notably the Scientific method (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sci...>), other disciplines or spheres of activity are disciplined in terms of the domain of enquiry, say history, religion or languages. Yet other disciplines are disciplined in terms of the cognitive faculties they address eg. performing arts.

But when it comes to philosophy, any attempt to define or bracket it is baffled by the very nature of philosophy. Philosophy, at best, is just an enquiry. It presents itself in any field of knowledge & existence, may subject itself to any particular nature of enquiry, it may relate itself to any aspect of human endeavour. Thus when the scientists dabble with untestable theories, relying on unobservable phenomena, they label it philosophy. Mathematician struggle with the nature & import of the numbers and relationships they work with and jump into the domain of philosophy. When jurors struggle with borderline cases where the idea of justice itself comes to question, they resort to a philosophical enquiry. When artists struggle with the idea of artistic merit, they delve into the question of what it means for something to be aesthetic. And most importantly, when your girlfriend leaves you, you get into an enquiry into life :D

It's one thing and it is everything.

I end with this joke:

A boy is about to go on his first date, and is nervous about what to talk about. He asks his father for advice. The father replies: "My son, there are three subjects that always work. These are food, family, and philosophy."

The boy picks up his date and they go to a soda fountain. Ice cream sodas in front of them, they stare at each other for a long time, as the boy's nervousness builds. He remembers his father's advice, and chooses the first topic. He asks the girl: "Do you like potato pancakes?" She says "No," and the silence returns.

After a few more uncomfortable minutes, the boy thinks of his father's suggestion and turns to the second item on the list. He asks, "Do you have a brother?" Again, the girl says "No" and there is silence once again.

The boy then plays his last card. He thinks of his father's advice and asks the girl the following question:

"If you had a brother, would he like potato pancakes?"

*If my representation of the views of some thinker was erroneous, kindly pardon me.

Other Questions Posed:

1. Why is there something rather than nothing?
2. Are facts merely temporary truths?
3. Is pure reason the ultimate tool for understanding absolute reality and existence?
4. Why are we always allowed more questions than answers if the questions like reality doesn't hold infinite possibilities we actually can achieve?
5. Can we transcend thought and existence itself?
6. What is the death of anything truly?
7. If there are no limits to intelligence, what is the point of existence?
8. Why do we feel like anything man made or imagined must certainly govern some sort of reality in some way?
9. Is thinking without action rational?
10. Is there really a difference between what is and what isn't other than perception?

Other Questions Posed:

1. What happened to all the anti-particles?
2. What preceded the big bang?
3. Is the universe a 3d hyperspherical surface in 4d?
4. Is there a set of laws which govern the physics of the universe?
5. Is time travel even possible?
6. Is there a "correct" interpretation of quantum physics. If so which is it?
7. How can we settle the free will vs determinism argument?
8. How can we settle the evolutionists vs intelligent design debate?
9. What would resolve the soul vs. mind-is-only-brain question?
10. Is the Religion vs Science dichotomy necessary?

Other Questions Posed:

1. Why is there something rather than nothing?
2. Is our universe real?
3. Do we have free will?
4. Does God exist?
5. Is there life after death?
6. Can you really experience anything objectively?
7. What is the best moral system?
8. What are numbers?
9. What is truth?
10. What is the meaning and purpose to life?
11. What is true happiness?
12. What is the best political system?
13. What is the best economic system?
14. What is good and evil, or do they even exist?
15. What is science, and how does it work?
16. Is there only the supernatural or natural?
17. What is knowledge, and the best kind?
18. What is evidence?
19. Do we have a soul?
20. What religion or lack of religion is the true position?
21. How do I define myself properly?
22. Do aliens exist?
23. How did life originate?
24. What is intelligence?
25. What is education?
26. What is art?
27. What is music?
28. What is beauty?
29. What is consciousness?
30. What is love?
31. What is infinity?
32. Has everything been here forever, or did it begin to exist?
33. When will everything end?
34. What is mathematics?
34. What is philosophy?
35. What is fashion?
36. What is human nature?
37. How does the Universe work?
38. What is time?
39. How will the future be?
40. What is history?
41. What is language?
42. Does God have properties?
43. Why should I be moral at all?
44. What are miracles, and do they happen?
45. Can we know certain truths without evidence?
46. Do universals exist?
47. What is logic and reason?
48. Should I commit suicide, or should I live?

49. What does it take to be healthy, and to live the longest amount of time, healthy as possible?
50. How do you stop suffering?
51. What is pleasure, how much should we have, and what should be the limits to achieve it?

Philosophy is the exploration of the questions that most persons wonder about. I think most persons have thought about every single one of the fundamental questions of philosophy at some time in their lives and have just never realized it; the way the questions are framed in philosophy can be a bit abstruse.

1. Who am I?
2. Why am I here?
3. How am I here?
4. Is there a reason I am here?
5. Is there a God?
6. Is it all fate or just coincidence?
7. Where do I go to from here?
8. What happens after death?
9. Do I really die?
10. Is there a need to fear?

Here are ten of the most much of the time made inquiries about the way of the universe and our place in it:

- Big Bang Theory – how and why did the universe start?
- Time Travel – is time travel physically or sensibly conceivable?
- Meaning of Life – what's the purpose of living? What are we doing here?
- Creation versus Development – would we say we are plunged from gorillas?
- Artificial Intelligence – could a PC have a brain?
- Life After Death – what is demise and why would it be advisable for us to trepidation it?
- Cultural Relativism – are good values relative or outright?
- Ethical Dilemmas – how would we settle on good and bad?
- Social Justice – ought the rich to help poor people?